Postures in Clay: The Vessels of Ai Weiwei (excerpt from 5,000-word essay)
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The Real and the Fake

Liu Weiwei’s first collaboration with his Ai was the Ming-replica *Blue and White* moon flask (1996) which was arguably the beginning of Ai’s obsession with the “fake.” For Old Wei this was simply the sanctification as art object of something he had been doing all along—creating imitation classical vessels using a team of potters, painters, glazers, and firers culled from an extensive network of technical schools in the city which has for centuries lived by this fate. Since then, and to this day, Old Wei has seen these two parts of his own enterprise—artworks for Ai Weiwei, and reproductions often sold as real antiques by domestic dealers and auctions—as closely parallel, even intertwined. For Ai, this condition of production is a foundational irony that lies behind all of his ceramic work, whether or not they are directly playing on questions of authenticity: the only reason the entire art of traditional Chinese ceramics has been allowed to live is the healthy market that exists for counterfeit replicas of classical works.

In a 2000 interview, before he had staged a single museum show, Ai Weiwei noted that:

*As to my porcelain-based works, the central issue is the issue of authenticity. What is real and what is fake or a reproduction? My porcelain works are the highest quality blue-and-white porcelain. Here is something packed with historical and cultural meaning. The works I’ve commissioned were of imperial guan standards, reproductions of the finest blue and white porcelain of the Kangxi, Qianlong, and Yongzheng periods, which in turn represented the apex of China’s porcelain tradition. During this period, there was nothing more prized. Porcelain production, collection and connoisseurship had reached their pinnacle, the peak of their cultural authority. Today, using the best artisans in Jingdezhen, we can reproduce this quality. If they were real in a modern context, let us say exhibited in a contemporary art exhibit, does their original value continue to exist? If it exists, then what is the significance of its existence? If they are fake, then how do they differ from authentic period pieces when they are exact replicas with no recognizable differences? If there is no recognizable difference between this piece and an authentic period piece then what does this do to the value of the original period piece, or for that matter, the modern replica? Let’s say we place an exact copy in a museum setting, would this not completely confuse museum-goers? Is it real or fake? How can a museum exhibit a modern reproduction as an authentic period piece? Does this not undermine the whole system?*¹

This basic question of the fake versus the real (a structuralist question really, not unlike that of the raw and the cooked) has preoccupied Ai Weiwei for over a decade. It relates directly to his more gestural practice of “destroying” ancient objects as a way of turning them into art. And yet the general milieu of Old Wei’s workshop calls into question the standard interpretation of Ai Weiwei’s prolonged emphasis on the “fake,” which pronounced in the Mandarin pinyin syllables that spell it is a homophone for that other great modality in Ai’s work, “fuck.” As originally posited, “fake” and “fuck” are one in the same: to counterfeit objects of great purported economic and cultural value was to fly in the face of hierarchies of price and approbation. In this logic, fakeness is an absolute condition in opposition to the genuine, and to embrace it is a move as much gestural as substantive, a way of declaring one’s independence (in the Western liberal tradition) or “unwillingness to cooperate” (in the Chinese *jianghu* tradition).² The original *Blue and White* works were not so different conceptually from pieces like *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*. Counterfeiting was, in the late 1990s, the flipside of destruction. For Ai Weiwei the fake and the real are only ever a half-step from one another, separated by cultural authority and discursive consensus rather than any essential difference. The same system which dictates that he should not drop a Han dynasty urn decides which vessels are vested with authenticity and which are not.³ Counterfeiting, in this typology, emerges as almost a gesture of care and respect, of stewardship through imitation. This position of remove, ultimately a position of love, makes ever more sense in the context of Old Wei’s workshop, where the flattery via imitation spans to include not just the blue-and-white vessels here being copied, but the works of Ai Weiwei himself.

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² Here the different titles assigned to the 2000 exhibition co-curated by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi becomes relevant—titled *Fuck Off* in English, the exhibition’s Chinese title *Bu Hezuo Fangshi* translates directly as “methods of non-cooperation.”
³ And yet ancient objects still retain for him a sense of unspoken greatness, illustrative of the past glories of Chinese civilization, a civilization he regards in the third person. “The Chinese designed everything,” he says. “Whatever they touched, they have a name for it, and a design.” Conversation with the author, January 5, 2008.